

ASPECTS
OF
THE
MONASTIC CALLING

by

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First published in the USA by the Abbey of Gethsemani *circa* 1970
Reprinted 1978, 1979

Cum Permissu Superiorum

Printed by the Saint Bernard Press
Mount Saint Bernard Abbey
celebrating 40 years
of fine printing
1954 - 1994

ASPECTS OF THE MONASTIC CALLING

PRELIMINARY

Life itself is mystery. It would follow that major aspects of life are involved with mystery. Birth and death, marriage and child-birth—these are mighty deep. It is to say nothing original, then to say that a calling to the monastic life is a mysterious thing. That much is obvious.

Response to mystery can be positive, however. While silent wonder is the most appropriate posture, the Christian realizes that it is in prayer that man best meets the unknown and unfathomable. This is, in fact, the only way to encounter God and those times we come closest to God acting in our lives.

A calling to the monastic life is a call first of all to prayer. Serious, deep, abiding prayer. Prayer is communication, the relation of lover to loved one. It is not so much a matter of words as of attitudes, a disposition of the heart and a frame of mind.

A man who is beginning to wonder whether or not he should become a monk is a wise man if he makes the wonder a form of prayer. He is touching something very awesome, indeed, very terrible. He may get burned. In any case, the whole business is something he will never forget as long as he lives.

STABILITY

There are monks in monasteries who have never been out of them in a lifetime. There is something remarkable about this, to say the least. Whether or not it is a good thing as well as a remarkable one is another matter. For some, though this is the meaning of stability.

It is one meaning. To practice “stability” means to stay in one’s monastery. It is surely simple enough and matter of fact. And if not easy, at least possible.

Stability has a bigger point, however. It is more than geography. There are people to whom celibacy means “never marrying”. To them stability means “never going anywhere”.

A monk takes a vow of stability to his monastery of profession. That means in principal terms that he belongs to that monastery and will remain there as long as he lives, obeying whatever abbot is at the head of it. He may leave the monastery many times and even for long periods and not in any way violate his stability. Ideally, however, he would remain in his monastery.

Why?

Primarily as an act of faith, it would seem. The religious who binds himself to a religious Order has committed himself to that group. His commitment is a real one, even if the scope in which it can operate is fairly large. The diocesan priest who binds himself to his Bishop likewise is committed and has limited himself. These are acts of religion and a deliberate curbing of freedom for the sake of the Kingdom and in imitation of the Lord Who bound Himself to the Father’s will.

The monk binds himself to his monastery. In a sense she is his bride. He takes her to wife, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. He does so for Christ’s sake and in imitation of Him Who made Israel His spouse and the human family His beloved.

Love is choice. No choice, no risk. But also, no choice, no love. It is this act of faith that is the deepest aspect of stability and its heart. This again is done in order to set the heart free. By crossing this bridge, or taking this step, or making this choice the monk throws in his lot with the Lord and puts himself and his future at the disposal of providence. Once done, and deeply done, this puts a monk at a level of availability he could not otherwise attain to. The man wandering around loose need not be free. The monk irrevocably bound to his abbot and his monastery is. He has found God’s will and this is to be free.

CELIBACY

The monk is a celibate. It is at least theoretically possible to speak of a married clergy. But it is not possible to speak of a married monk. A married man might become a monk, and a monk might become a married man, but a monk is not married. He is celibate.

Christ was a celibate. The monk follows Him in this. Christ took to wife the people of Israel; His spouse is the Church. The monk does as much also, taking to wife the monastery as the miniature church. For this church, model of the Church itself, and image of the whole world, the monk gives himself to God and serves this people for love.

But it is basically an inner reality. Man is two-dimensional and spends his life bringing about a basic harmony and eventual unity of the forces within him. Most people do this through marriage. In the kingdom of heaven there will be no marriage and giving in marriage because there we will have attained basic wholeness. There we will be as the angels, not in having no bodies, but in having fullness of being.

The monk lives the angelic life on earth, not through having no body, or worse, pretending he had none, but seeking to achieve the inner unity by the wholeness of his life.

This is no small goal. If human marriage does not always come off as well as was hoped for, it can be assumed that the celibate life is not without its hazards. But some hazards are necessary and worth taking. Those who respond to a call to celibacy are taking a risk and venturing on a difficult road. They might as well face that. Let him who can take it, take it.

There have always been monks where there has been a highly developed culture, and there have always been virgins and celibates. This is as old as human nature. Priests and poets and artists sad celibate: are put of the human scene. always have been and always will be.

There have always been men and women who have been aware of a call to wholeness by way of the inner experience. There are such today too. Monks are men of this group. There are people who think of the celibate as loveless. This a horrible thought. Celibacy is precisely a way of love. It is love not through the physical body and sexual communion, but on the mystical and spiritual plane. It is not a matter of a better love: it is love on a different level. It is love in a different mode. Love of another kind. Married people are also capable of this sort of love—as indeed all men and women are. But the monk, the celibate, makes a total plunge into this manner of love and by means of it seeks in the grace of God to reach deep into the mystery of love for God and man.

Not everyone appreciates this or desires it. That is not the point. The monk simply feels called to it. In the case of the monk it has nothing to do with contempt for woman: contempt for woman is no sign of a call to celibacy. Certainly not to consecrated celibacy.

In some regions of the earth and in some religions, men enter into a monastic form of life after having been married and having raised a family. There is much to be said for this, and it points out that in addition to married love, there is another and different kind of love which is expressed in the celibate state. In this instance, the experience of married love would be a benefit to growth in divine love. One the other hand, there have always been men who in early years have chosen the celibate way and have lived it throughout their lives.

This is not an easy road nor a light discipline, but it is of profound beauty and meaning, and opens up riches of spiritual experience for the good of man and for the glory of God.

The monastery seeks to provide such a setting as will make this celibate life a fruitful one and with a balanced life of prayer, work, and reading help the monk achieve a maturity in love which grace has led him to.

COMMUNITY

A monk is a member of a community. Though the calling is basically solitary (monos means alone), it is normally acted out in community, in a monastery. When one thinks of monks one thinks of monasteries.

One joins such a community in the expectation that here one will find like-minded brethren in search for a common goal. It is common goals that gather men: selling insurance, climbing mountains, playing chess. The "search for God" is what monks have in common. More than that, a search for God within a certain frame of reference, within a certain tradition.

A Benedictine follows the rule handed down by Saint Benedict and his followers. There are many varieties of Benedictines, among them being Cistercians. There are even varieties of Cistercians, and, for all that, one Cistercian monastery will differ from another. Yet a Cistercian is a recognizable Benedictine and every Cistercian monastery will have something in common with every house in the Order.

The Order, the Rule, the monastery is there to provide the means by which one follow a calling to the love and service of God. Monks do not keep monasteries going, and monasteries the Order. It is the other way round. But it is important to see the service that monasteries and Orders provide. They have a tradition, a history, a patrimony. When they are in touch with this tradition, are faithful to it, and have a profound understanding of it, we have the ideal situation. Every monastery tries to keep in touch with its basic spirit and exemplify it in the contemporary scene.

It is this sense of family which gives great strength to a monastic group. Any man anywhere, any group of men anywhere, could become monks. But you may be sure they would endeavor very soon to get in touch with a tradition, either through living monks or through texts, in order to pick up the thread of continuity.

There is nothing unusual in this: doctors are in a sense, in living touch with the whole past medical profession: but it is important to grasp its significance. It is a bit more than merely carrying on an old tradition. Monks are not museum keepers or museum pieces. But monks do have a sense of history. And it is this which gives their lives depth and scope. A people without history is a people in danger, for they have lost touch with their roots.

It is through his community that the monk is in touch with the monastic charism and its discipline. By means of the community he comes to know the gift of God and how to respond to it. A monastery is often compared to the Church for the reason that as one is in union with Christ through the Church, so one by his community works out his relationship to his calling from God.

THE ABBOT

The role of the abbot in the monastery and in the monk's life is at once pivotal and tender. It is quite true to say that the life of the monks revolves around the abbot: in a sense he sets the tone of the place and gives it the quality and character it has. On the other hand, there is nothing automatic about it. We deal with something very fragile and delicate. When it works it is wonderful; but even when it doesn't, when the abbot or the monks or both are not quite what they should be, it still has something sacramental about it: a medium of grace and light notwithstanding human foible. This is said not so much to canonize incompetence and inadequacy—as if there were something divine about bungling—but simply to encourage: human situations are generally less than ideal. There is a kind of refuge in perfectionism which serves as solace for aggressive characters which will never come up to the basic issue: a matter of faith.

The monk reaches his abbot in faith or he does not reach him at all. In a sense he acts out the ancient quest for the spiritual father and submits himself to his regime in order to

become a free man. His confidence in the father helps him make the plunge, but no matter how worthy the spiritual guide, it is the disciple who must in the end make the jump: inadequacy in the father will never make up for want of courage in the son. There are monks who get nowhere and blame their abbot. It is not always quite so pat.

The abbot is at once a leader and a follower. He is under oath to maintain the rule and yet he is also one who deals with human persons. The more truly he listens to God which is to say the holier he is, the more surely will he listen to men, since God is everywhere. A true abbot does not follow his flock wherever they would go, nor does he drive them after his own designs. He does something of both.

He is like Christ and His Church, like a bishop and his diocese, a pastor and his parish, a husband and his wife. A man who does not listen to his wife misses the secret. On the other hand, you cannot dance with someone who will not lead.

The monk sees Christ in his abbot, not as an act of the imagination, but as an expression of faith in something deeper than skin. In this relationship he grows in love and responds to the action of God in his own history.

Abbots fail. So do monks. And monasteries. Not to say marriages. But if you want something guaranteed not to fail, are you able to love? Failures, after all, are part of the success. And in any case we are not always sure which is which.

There is no question that in the monk's role in relation to his abbot we touch on one of the most profound aspects of the monastic life. That being so, it is best to approach it in faith first of all. That is the only realistic approach. Anything short of that is simply not in touch with the total picture.

Anyone thinking about the monastic life might well dwell with these thoughts awhile. It is one thing to view the ship from the dock and dream of far-away places; it is quite another to be on board, and in every kind of weather.

SERVICE

It is in community that one learns the discipline of service. And it is this discipline in turn which opens one to the workings of God in the Spirit. For a group of men to live together in harmony and peace there must be sacrifice and generosity. The good of the brethren and the interests of others must often take precedence over one's own desires. Selfless service of others is a great school of love.

And yet it is love of a particular sort. It is different from familial love, since a monastery is not strictly speaking a family. The relation of husband and wife, parents and children is not there. We speak of the "monastic family", but only in a loose sense of the word. It would be fatal to look for the monastic community to supply what one would normally have in a family.

It is more than fraternal love, since a monastery is not just a fraternity. One does speak more correctly of the monks having brotherly love for one another, yet even this must be understood correctly. They are more than "buddies". More than comrades. More even than brothers in the flesh. Their love for one another is primarily in Christ. It is because they love Christ that they love one another.

The ideal of monastic love is noble and not easily come by. It takes time and effort and grace to bring it about. But a community of men with genuine love for one another in Christ is a great joy. It is a profound force in the world, able to move mountains. It will not always be obvious, even to those who share in it. This kind of love is deeper than smiles and camaraderie, a certain effusive sentiment. It is a kind of love that makes death for one's brother easy and understandable.

Thus monks wash each other's clothes and do the dishes, cook the food and clean the toilets; they type letters and milk cows, wash sinks and make cheese, bake cake and bread, and get dinner ready. They work, in other words, and endeavor to work literally for love.

And it is this discipline of service which opens the heart and makes a man available to the Lord God who would woo his heart if He could get close enough. It is service that lets God in because self has been driven out.

SOLITUDE

Monks are lonely men. This does not make them particularly different, since most men are lonely. It is what they do with their loneliness that makes them somewhat different.

One good reason for community is to teach the monk how to live with loneliness. There are men who are "loners" by nature or by instinct. They would not necessarily make good monks, in fact it is not likely that they would. The monk usually is very social and likes people. But he has a dimension which is open to solitude. All men have this dimension, but not all are interested in it or want to cultivate it. Monks are much interested in the solitary aspects of life because it is here that one best meets God.

We come into the world alone and we leave it alone, no matter how many attend us. Man has an infinite loneliness, a loneliness without measure. On this seashore the monk often walks and ponders. Under this lonely sky he often stands. At such times he does nothing, for there is nothing you can do. But he lets it happen to him. He lets it sink in.

His greatest help in learning this art is community. It is the experience of deep love that makes it possible for one to accept the large experience of solitude. And the deeper the experience of love, the more intense the entry into the depths of one's being.

A community in which genuine love flourishes will also be a community in which there is a great love for solitude, for the reason that one leads to the other. It is the experience of genuine love that gives one courage to stand alone before God.

Solitude is an environment of love and only those who have known love can enter upon it fruitfully. There are many lonely people, but not all of them are in love. It is the monk's desire to enter into the mystery of love in its ultimate expression, deep in his own heart. Community life prepares him for this.

SECLUSION

Most people today take a dim view of the monk's desire for seclusion. They see it as "flight" and do not appreciate the monk for "fleeing". Perhaps flight is not the best word.

Certainly the monk does not escape anything. Nor does he desire to.

Pressed to explain, the monk might perhaps turn the thing around and say that it was precisely because he was tired of running that he became a monk. Taken from one point of view, who is more in "flight" than the man "of the world"? When one talks of escape, one might more likely look elsewhere than a monastery if he wants to see it in action.

People in flight had best not come to monasteries. And those who desire to escape had best look down another road. This is no place for the timid and the skittish. Those who fear their own depths and the deep of night had better find something to occupy them or to divert them.

There is nothing wrong with this. God has not called everyone to the inner experience. Not all are equal to it. Some shy away from their own depths with very good reason. Solitude is not everyone's dish, nor the lonely life.

But it is a bit unfair to call those who embark upon it men in flight. The monk is a man of his time and when he goes into the desert, he takes his world with him. Every man's heart is a little universe and to understand one's time one need only read one's own heart, honestly and truly.

The monk seeks quiet and peace and seclusion not to get away from “the world”, but to get closer to it. Not to flee the time’s ills, but to heal them.

This is the center of the monks whole life. The purpose of the monastery is to provide a setting in which this inner business can go on. The monastic community can be a lot of things and is many things to many people, but it is this inner activity that is the very heart. Without this it is simply not a monastery, and with it, the place is justified.

The style of monastic seclusion varies from age to age. As in other areas, there are styles here too. Architecture, vesture, daily schedules, diet, means of income – all these change from time to time. And so do the forms of seclusion. At one time high walls and big gates were the thing. At another an absolute interdict on newspapers and magazines. At another visits at the monastery or out of it. There are many varieties of religious experience in terms of monastic seclusion. But if it is a monastery that makes any pretence at contemplative life, there will be some sort of guarantee that the monks have all the experience of silence and solitude that they want and need. Without this the vine withers and dies and the place becomes a harmless addition to the landscape.

SILENCE

Perhaps one of the things that is envied in the monk’s life is silence. In a world becoming daily more noisy, the idea of a place of quiet, of a life in which there are areas of silence, becomes very attractive.

Silence is a privilege to which all are entitled and of which most are robbed in this barbaric age. The monk is not a freak for loving silence; he is simply normal and human.

The average monastery is not nearly as quiet as it should be, since the monks come from a noisy world and think noise a necessary quality of all genuine life. Only slowly do they learn the beauty and meaning of quiet. Machinery is noisy and monks are from a machine age and need a lot of it.

Despite these drawbacks, silence is a real part of monastic life. It is perhaps the greatest single factor in spiritual growth. Without it nothing can happen.

It is not a matter of taciturnity. Men who do not easily and happily communicate with their fellowmen do not make good monks. A lack of sensitivity to others is no sign of a Trappist vocation. On the other hand, the monk must gradually acquire a feeling for silence. Unless the monks in the monastery are aware of the point of quiet they will not build a quiet house. And a quiet house is the basic background.

One reason monks rise early to pray is the quiet of the night. Darkness is a kind of visual quiet and monks love it. The hours before dawn are sacred.

Silence need not make the monks a weird crew, though this sometimes happens when common sense is abandoned. Monks in former times went to great lengths to “keep silence”.

Their efforts strike modern man as somewhat theatrical and showy. But unless a man can see the point of silence he might just as well not bother coming to the monastery. It is inevitable that the whole thing will never mean anything to him. He has to have a feeling for this kind of thing.

Simply has to.

PRAYER

The monk is called to a life of prayer. The traditional prayer of the monk is the book of psalms, and hence it has become traditional also to think of the monk as one who loves to pray these psalms. This is still true.

The psalter is the monk’s prayer book. The saying or the chanting of psalms is still basic to the monk’s life. Here too there have been various changes in the course of history as

to manners and methods in the praying of the psalter. At times the monks have said a great many psalms in a day, sometimes in rather elaborate forms.

In connecting psalmody and the monk we bring together two important elements: that a monk is a man of prayer and that the monk is a man of the psalter.

The monk is a man of prayer and the monastery is there to help him achieve this. To pray means to make love to God, to be in touch with God, in communion with Him. This could mean long hours in church, many hours with divine service: it need not. What it does mean and what is basic is that the monk lives in a setting, an atmosphere, a world of prayer. He is a man to whom prayer is his life, his love. In a sense he is always at prayer. This prayer may at times be formal and explicit: Holy Mass, for example. At other times, quiet and informal. But it is more or less always there somehow or other, one way or other. It is as a man with a good wife: she is in a sense never out of his mind and heart, never far from him.

The psalter is the monk's book because the monk is a man in touch with the whole world. From his own heart he knows what life is and what man is. The psalter is a man's book of prayer. It is deep and mysterious. It plumbs to man's depths and ascends to his highest peaks. Here is man at his worst and at his best. Here are thoughts best not mentioned and desires best left lie. Here is man as is, calling on the Redeemer and the Saviour. The monk loves the psalter because it covers the familiar ground of his own heart. In it he reads his own mind and says what his lips hardly would otherwise dare form. The psalter is not a pretty book, but it is a real one. It is in touch with reality.

That is why the test of the monk has always been the psalter. Saint Benedict was always anxious to know whether the monk loved the psalms or not. He was shrewd, for it is a good test. If a monk can take up the psalter and read it out of his own heart and make it his own, then he knows what it's all about. He is with it. Until then he is just skimming along.

In which case, just let him stay with it. Let him taste hours of darkness. Let him know silence. Let him do humble services to his brethren. Let him go a little hungry. Let him taste his own poverty. And then, with the help of God and His Holy Mother, the thing will open up for him. A bit at a time. He will feel something between his teeth. And the psalter will come to life.

POVERTY

People in an affluent society are always charmed with poverty. Religious poverty, practiced by others. It makes them feel better, less guilty. If they could hire a group of holy women to live in wretched poverty for their sakes, they would do so.

That is one approach. There are many others. For a group of men to pool their resources and live in community of ownership makes a lot of sense and by some is understood to be a form of "poverty".

It is also a recognized form of poverty to live in a simple style of life synonymous with plain living.

To live in dependence on a superior and without jurisdiction over one's material resources is also one expression of poverty.

The monk's poverty is probably a bit of all these approaches. Though sometimes a monk may live in a rather primitive setting with a style of monastic buildings which is clearly redolent of the original Citeaux, it is even more likely that he will live in a rather handsome complex such as Gethsemani has. But even here he may find the overall impression rather severely simple and, to some minds, cold and austere. The point of buildings is that they serve the monk, that they help him do what he came to the monastery to do. There is no question that men are influenced by their environment, and the monk by his. It is possible to build such an environment as to serve the monk well, and this is something monks continue

to try to do. They sometimes succeed. Sometimes there is a sort of compromise in which the result is over or under the mark.

The sum of all this is to be read in the monk's heart, for there is the field of action for poverty. The monk's style of life may be awesome in its rigor, it may be dangerously close to the affluent style of the well-heeled suburbanite: he can get as used to one as to the other and live interiorly without reference to either. Most monks, however, need something going outside to keep the inner fire burning.

Yet it remains true: it is the inner fire that matters. Without that nothing has much meaning. External poverty can become an obsession and a worse problem than wealth. And a wealthy monastery often wishes it weren't. Even so, one forgets that it is not the same thing to share a lot of common wealth and to own it personally; all groups have problems getting members to take good care of equipment and machinery, tools and supplies, for the obvious reason that it is one thing to own something and quite another to have use of it.

The monastic program of silence and solitude, of work and service of worship and obedience, of community life, will bring the monk to such an experience of inner desolation and destitution as to make everything else pale. In such a setting a man may learn a little about humility, may shed some of his arrogance and come down to size; may taste of despair and his own futile existence, may develop a sense of trust in Providence and a hope in salvation through Christ the Lord. He may, in short, come to be a poor man. If he is willing to walk that road with the Lord, he will find a real kingdom, the one promised the poor.

OBEDIENCE

If a man can learn the secret of obedience he will be well on his way to the secret of the monastic life. It is quite true to say that there is risk in many aspects of the monastic life: there are dangers in silence and solitude; those not prepared for it and not equal to it may find the monastic life may bring them to the shores of breakdown. This does not mean that monastic life is sick: it means that there are people to whom an inner experience is better left be. There is no need to fear any of this. If one is candid with those who interview when one enters, speaks freely with his abbot or director, all will be well.

There is however a certain risk involved in obedience that must be taken and is essential to the monastic life. One must learn somehow to take one's life in one's hands and place it in the hands of another. This sounds easy. It isn't. It is very difficult. There are one million ways to do it and slip out of it. Until you have tried to do it you have no business discussing it. It may happen many times, but it is certain to happen at least once that one's whole life depends on a moment's willingness to lay it on the line. This happens to most people. To anyone willing to look closely there may come a moment in one's life which in every sense of the word is a moment of destiny, a moment to which one can, in later years, look back and realize that everything was leading to that point, and everything flows thence from it. There is no way of knowing when such a moment may come; indeed, one may not even recognize it until long after. But one thing is certain: you will miff it unless you have learned how to lay it on the line. And the secret of that art is simple: you have to risk all to gain all. And though there is a lot of talk about risk theology, you will find that there is not too much of it practiced.

The whole point and purpose of this obedience is to put one in a proper relationship to God. There cannot possibly be any dialogue between God and man unless there is an openness, a willingness to listen on the part of man. This is not to be assumed as present. Further, there is necessary for God's action on the human soul such a willingness to be at His disposal, almost as mere putty in His hands, that unless a man be willing to learn it by the hard discipline of obedience it may not be learned at all. In that case one simply does not achieve the growth he was called to, for it must be understood that the mature life, the holy

life, is one in which one lives at one's peak level, for all one is worth. Achievement is the fruit of discipline and discipline is not easy to come by. It is simply naive to assume that one can achieve anything in terms of a relationship with God unless one is quite willing at a moment's notice to lay one's life down for Him. After all, being true to one's own truth is also a matter of listening and responding and it is one's own truth one responds to in listening to God. If the obedient man will speak of victory, it is also the obedient man who is master of his own destiny.

There is no aspect of monastic life more difficult than this, none more misunderstood, and for all that, misused. Be that as it may, it remains the key and was much stressed by Saint Benedict and by all monastic teachers.

FASTING

Fasting is no longer fashionable in most quarters today. There are, to be sure, vast areas of the world where few get enough to eat, but the voluntary denial of food to one's self for spiritual reasons is not very common. There is a considerable amount of vanity fasting or weight-watching, but that is not to be mentioned in the same breath.

Notwithstanding the trends of the age, monks still fast. They do not eat meat at all, and the mortification of the appetite by abstemious eating at certain seasons or at certain times is still recognized as a sound practice in the ascetic life.

Western man has not done too well in the development of the techniques in prayer and contemplation; it would follow that he has not properly understood the role of fasting. With the growing awareness of the great value of many practices of the Orient in forms and methods of prayer, we may be sure that fasting will come into its own once again.

The curbing of the appetites, the calming of the passions. The control of one's impulses and urges, drives, is basic to the monastic life, and a hope to move in the depth of one's prayer without growth in self-control is naive in the extreme.

For the sake of the beginner, however, let us say that in this matter environment can be of great help. A consumer-oriented social setting is not the best preparation for a life of denial. A monastic environment is perhaps a little better. In a world free of frantic stimulation of the sexual and consumer-appetites it is rather much easier to get a better hold of one's self and learn the beauty of being master of one's flesh and one's stomach.

Fasting cools one's heat, slows one down, softens the harshness of one's self-assertion, makes one more gentle and calm. It does these things when done well. If fasting is simply made an act of prowess and a bit of vulgar display, nothing will come of it.

Dependent characters often find fasting very difficult and entertain exaggerated notions of their need for nourishment. A society almost infantile in its need for nourishment. A society almost infantile in its need for something to drink, something to chew on, something to taste, to suck, to smoke, to inhale, is scarcely one to encourage self-sufficiency and independence, but in a monastery one will find the climate healthier.

In this matter practically all is left to one's own discretion and the guidance of one's spiritual father, since former detailed rulings imposed on all no longer are the order of the day. Now matters can be adjusted to the personal needs of each.

ON JESUS

The whole thing revolves around Christ and love for Him, the Lord and the Saviour. Christ is not just your older Brother, though He is that too if you like. But more than that, He is God and Man, Redeemer, Saviour. He is most of all Perfect Man, Whole Man, Man entire and intact, Man beautiful and holy, Man complete and fulfilled. He is poet and mystic, He is dreamer and savant, He is leader and teacher. He lived, He taught, He suffered, He died, and He rose from the dead and ascended into the Heaven to which He leads us and calls us. He

would have us follow Him, in living and in dying, in rising and ascending with Him. He is part of all human life and all human history and would have us join Him in that experience of organic and spiritual unity. He is wed to the whole human family as His bride and unless you are willing to take the whole human family to your own heart, He will have no part of you. He calls on men to suffer and to die with Him and for Him for His own: you are called to that also. His Church is His continued presence on earth: the Church is His spouse intimate and close, chosen, elected, ravished by His love for her and through her for all of man. Unless you have a passionate love for Holy Church, bride of Christ, it would be better not to come close. He is present in His church in her teaching and her holy life, which is His life flowing through her and into the whole world. The church is a great mystery, but a great love first of all. The monk is called to grow in love for her, for Christ's life in her, through her. Pope and Bishop and Priest are more than just people to the monk, more than just churchmen. And his life in the church is just sustained by an eating of the Body of the Lord and the drinking of His Holy Blood. For that Lord he would gladly die, as for Him he gladly and joyously lives. Christ is the beginning of the monk's day, and its end. Christ is the point of the monastic life, its core and purpose. Without Him it is just a pious exercise. With Him it is a love affair without parallel this side of eternity.

PRIESTHOOD

All who take up the monastic way of life in a permanent way are monks. Some of these monks are priests and some are not. One might wonder how this works out.

Sometimes a man is a priest already when he comes to the gate and asks to enter. Most of the priests in the monastery, however, were ordained some years after they entered, having completed a course of study. The monastery provides the needed courses or else sends the monk to centers where good courses may be had. No one is ordained, then without proper preparation, even if the preparation is heavily oriented in the direction of the monastic life. The monastery priest is ordained for the service of the monastery, so it is only right that the preparation be monastic.

So long as monastic priesthood is seen in this context, there is no problem. In former times the "choir monks" were normally ordained to the priesthood after studies. Today there are no such divisions; all are monks. The selection of priests depends on the same factors that govern this selection anywhere: the desires of the candidate, the needs of the monastery, the willingness of the abbot and the community to have the monk ordained. When all these factors are positive and the conditions are fulfilled, the Bishop comes out and ordains one of the monks for the service of the monastery.

On the other hand, monks who want to study philosophy and theology, not to say Scripture and courses usually part of a seminary program, are free to do so. Many do.

It is important to put things in their right light. Should one feel called by God to the service of the altar and God's people, this primary call should be answered. On the other hand, since the monastery is peopled by monks, a call to enter a monastery would not usually include a call to the priesthood. It might, but it need not. But if one did desire to become a monk, and hoped also to become a priest, then one says so and leaves the rest to God and His Providence. In other words, he does as a candidate to the priesthood does anywhere: he offers himself, prepares himself, hopes he will be found acceptable. If not accepted, he either goes elsewhere to try again, or he gives up the idea. A monk, of course is usually in solemn vows by this time, and therefore not free to go elsewhere. But during the long years preceding he will have had ample opportunity to work out this aspect of his vocation.

The ministry of the priesthood in the monastery is limited. He offers Holy Mass, hears confessions. Once in a great while he may preach or give a retreat, some conferences. His spiritual direction will at times be called for. His training in philosophy and theology and

other courses will be very useful to the monastic life. For the most part, however, his ministry is modest and apart from the service of the altar he is simply part of the monastic community.

TO BE DISCOURAGED

Some kinds of people are much drawn to monasteries and must be warned that such a life is not good for them, and may even do them much harm. Normally such characters will be noted before they enter, but a great deal of anguish can be spared them if they do not even move that far along the road toward something that is not meant for them.

People with emotional hang-ups of serious dimensions — enough to require hospitalization or long therapy with psychiatrists — ought to stay clear of monasteries no matter how strongly they feel that God is calling them to enter one.

Let us put it plainly: monastic life is no picnic. Day by day there is really nothing very difficult about it, but put a number of days in a row, one after another, and certain types are apt to climb the walls. Some people cannot stand silence, seclusion, monotony, quiet, a lack of excitement and diversion. Neurotic, psychotic types surely not.

If you do not like people, the monastery is no place to go. If you hate the world, this is no place to come. If you get moody and depressed this will crush you for sure.

To ask for healthy young men from a culture as sick as ours is to ask a great deal. But there must be a certain amount of good sense of courage and of enthusiasm. There will have to be a love for life and a desire to truly live.

Narrowing it down to what makes the contemplative calling we might add: a sense of wonder.

And a certain intuitive grasp that there is something else besides action. That while action is good enough and absolutely necessary, there is another side to the coin: there is something to be said for musing, for pondering, for mulling.

There ought to be a desire to go to some place where men pray, yes; where they work, yes; where they read good books, yes, but in addition to that, where they do nothing. Where the pause that refreshes is not a drink... a place for men who love the night. And know the moon, who listen to birds sing and watch the wind in the grass on the hill.

And men who can take discipline, can accept the responsibility of being who they are and what they are.

WHEN?

Finish high school for sure.

Know what it is to work for a living.

An experience of college can be useful, depending on where you go and what you do while there.

Fundamental abilities are much in order: using a shovel, an axe, a hoe, driving a truck, a tractor.

Fundamental crafts are very salutary: carpentry, bookbinding, printing, machinist, plumbing, cooking, baking, forestry.

Arts and letters are fine: foreign language, classics, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, literature.

Science: a little goes a long way. Nature study: excellent.

Travel: fine: Europe, Orient, South America, USA. Most think 18 is too young, but it has been done, successfully. Also unsuccessfully many times.

College is good if you can get it down.

We like it if you can listen to music and play some.

We like it if you notice rain, feel the wind, hear the birds, smell the soup. We like you to be aware, not asleep; alive not dead; in touch, not gone.

As for drugs, if you've gone too far, this may be tough for you. But here, we feel we do not need them: our culture is not that sick here in the monastery.

Granted the horrid state of things today, we still feel that the monastic thing works for those called to it and that you can take it straight and get out of it all it has to offer and that without benefit of artificial stimulus.

You ought to have your moral life pretty well in hand by the time you are thinking of a monastery. Sudden conversions are all right, but their depth should be tested.

Monks are sinners, every one, but they all feel too that a man should finish his soup before he goes on to the next course.

A visit to the monastery for a few days is always in order. You can talk with a vocational secretary. Others too if you like. A day or two in the monastery, a few talks with some of these monks and you ought to know whether the thing is worth carrying any further. Write the guestmaster to have a room for you.